

Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative Project Summary (Updated September 2024)

BACKGROUND

What Is the Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative?

The Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative is a volunteer effort that brings community members together for small group dialogues in an atmosphere of respect and trust. The initiative aims to strengthen community connections and to address the increasingly divisive tone of our public discourse by creating a constructive environment for discussing important issues affecting our community. We organize carefully planned, facilitated conversations that are intended to build relationships and increase understanding, rather than to reach agreement or consensus.

The initiative began in the summer of 2020, in the midst of the global pandemic. For the first two years, all planning and programming was conducted remotely. In the initial phase, Select Board member Lise Olney and former Assistant Executive Director Amy Frigulietti recruited four people to help build a diverse facilitator team of 25 people – drawing from the town staff and many other parts of the community. All participating volunteer facilitators have been trained in [Reflective Structured Dialogue](#) by [Essential Partners](#) of Cambridge, MA. The initiative is led by a rotating planning team made up of the trained volunteer facilitators. The current planning team members are Dave Cohen, Leda Eizenberg, Marjorie Freiman, Will Griffin, Deed McCollum, Lise Olney, and Rama Ramaswamy.

What Is Dialogue?

Dialogue is a conversation that is a search for mutual understanding rather than a search for agreement or an effort to formulate a plan of action. People come to a dialogue to understand views that are different from their own, as well as the beliefs, values, assumptions, and experiences that have shaped those views. **The process of the dialogue is the product.**

- **Format:** A dialogue is more structured than an ordinary conversation. For example, during the early portion of the dialogue, people will be asked to respond to a couple of questions in a “go-round” with a time limit for each person to answer.
- **Atmosphere:** The atmosphere of the dialogue is respectful. No one dominates the conversation, no one interrupts, and everyone is given equal time to share. The conversation is focused on listening and learning, not persuading.

- **Communications agreements:** To create a respectful environment, each dialogue group will discuss a set of agreements about how they will communicate.

Considering Our Impact

The nature of dialogue is different from other town forums or meetings in which the purpose is generally to identify action steps, to build consensus, or to gather data. Dialogue *can* be used for these purposes, but thus far, our initiative has focused on organizing dialogues in which the process is the product and no specific post-dialogue action steps are anticipated.

In a community-building enterprise, objectives include building relationships, creating belonging, and fostering connectedness. It is hard to gather and measure concrete progress because there are no visible or tangible deliverables. How a community is moved toward broader mutual understanding and acceptance is wholly subjective and dependent upon each separate aspect of, and each unique participant in, the dialogue experience.

The planning team has taken the long view, like educators, who often cannot quantify the success of their work immediately, and for whom positive results may be anecdotal and can take time to emerge. The team views the dialogues as skill-building – offering the community a different way to engage with neighbors and acquaintances in meaningful conversation, and to become sensitized to each others' experiences. We are hopeful that unconscious beliefs and assumptions will evolve to become more inclusive and empathetic. We share Essential Partners' objective of having facilitators model for participants a form of conversation that can break down barriers to mutual understanding.

After each dialogue, the planning team has gathered feedback from participants, dedicated time to debriefing with the facilitator team, and made adjustments to our approach. In the next phase of our initiative, we plan to work with Essential Partners on a protocol for pre- and post-dialogue assessments to continue to evaluate our impact.

WCDI PROGRAMS

Facilitator Training (March 2021)

Ten town staff and ten community members volunteered to participate in a two day training conducted by Essential Partners on March 11-12, 2021. The primary purpose was to learn how to facilitate dialogue among people with differing views in an atmosphere of respect and trust.

Funding: Grants from Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association (MIIA) and the Community Fund for Wellesley, as well as staff support from the Town of Wellesley.

Training Description:

The training was focused on

- Understanding the impacts of perceived threat on relationships
- How to design and facilitate Reflective Structured Dialogue

The training equipped participants to

- Create safe-enough space for open-hearted engagement that encourages curiosity, community and connection across differences
- Utilize agreements, structure, preparation, and inquiry
- Utilize Reflective Structured Dialogue to help people overcome divisions
- Develop competence and confidence to facilitate through challenging moments

Webinar: “Community Conversations: How Citizens Are Rebuilding the Public Square” (March 2021)

Two hour webinar on March 23, 2021.

- 123 participants
- 5 panelists

On March 23, 2021, we conducted a two hour webinar to introduce the Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative to our community. Our guests were Kathy Eckles and Brian Blancke of Essential Partners, Ora Grodsky and Alice Poltorick of Watertown Community Conversations and Watertown Forward, and Anna Eliot of Groton Civil Discourse Project. The program included a description of facilitated dialogue and how it has been used to bring together people with diverse perspectives for open and inclusive public conversations.

Funding: grants from Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association (MIIA) and the Community Fund for Wellesley, as well as staff support from the Town of Wellesley.

Coping with COVID-19 Dialogue (April 2021)

A Dialogue on Coping with COVID-19 (via Zoom), Tuesday April 6, 2021 - Two hour facilitated dialogue. All remote.

- 70 participants
- 21 facilitators

Funding: grants from Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association (MIIA) and the Community Fund for Wellesley, as well as staff support from the Town of Wellesley.

Dialogue Description: We chose the topic of COVID-19 for our first community dialogue because COVID-19 was a subject that everyone in the community was dealing with. The goal of the dialogue was to provide an experience of what dialogue is like and provide an opportunity for members of the community to share perspectives on what COVID has been like for them and to notice some insights or strengths emerging from this experience. The event started with a brief introduction, then attendees divided into breakout rooms to engage in a dialogue led by facilitators who had participated in the training on March 11 and 12. Facilitators followed a script developed by Essential Partners.

Feedback and Take-Aways: Following the dialogue, we asked participants to respond to a brief feedback form. Participants reported the following:

- Strong interest in using facilitated dialogue to explore a topic on which there are divergent perspectives.
- Strong interest in making sure that a broad range of perspectives are represented in the dialogue.
- Dialogue format made it easy to connect and have meaningful conversations.
- Facilitated dialogue was perceived by some to be a potentially useful tool for the community.
- Feelings of deep loss were expressed by some participants.
- Personal aspect of the dialogue made some people uncomfortable.

Values Dialogue (January/February 2022)

Three-part dialogue series - all remote.

- 48 participants (8 groups)
- 17 facilitators
- Co-sponsors: St. John/St. Paul Collaborative, Temple Beth Elohim, UU Wellesley Hills, Wellesley-Weston Chabad, Wellesley Public Schools Central Council, Wellesley Village Church

Funding: Granted from the R.W. Babson Fund by the Wellesley Select Board.

Dialogue Description: This series explored personal values and how those values are reflected in our contributions to the community and in how we engage with one another. Participants met

- **Dialogue 1, Thursday, January 27, 2022** - Share personal values and experiences, and what being a part of this community means to us.
- **Dialogue 2, Thursday, February 3, 2022** - Identify the values we want to see reflected in how we talk to each other and create communication agreements that reflect those values.
- **Dialogue 3, Thursday, February 17, 2022** - Apply our communication agreements and practice deep engagement on a topic chosen by participants that is affecting our schools and/or community.

Goals of this dialogue series:

- To explore our personal and community values and how they drive our commitment and contribution to the community
- To engage in a process of conversation that helps us to see Wellesley at our best, relating in ways that demonstrate our values
- To create communication agreements that can support our community in respectful listening and engagement on issues where we may disagree
- To model for our children and each other the power and possibility of civil discourse on even the most complex, challenging issues

Feedback and Take-Aways: Participants for this series were asked to complete both a pre-dialogue and post-dialogue survey. The pre-dialogue survey was conducted prior to the beginning of the series, the post-dialogue survey was conducted at the end of the third session.

- At the conclusion of the series, facilitators acknowledged the importance of:
 - Modifying our pre-dialogue conversations with participants to provide more explanation of this type of dialogue and help set participants' expectations
 - Ideally arrange for the facilitators to have pre-dialogue conversations with participants in their groups to better understand any concerns the participant may have in advance of and in preparation for the dialogue,
 - Selecting a topic with energy around it that all participants wish to discuss.
 - Allowing space for a more organic discussion.
- Responses from the 76% participant surveys that responded to both the pre and post surveys yielded mixed results. Members of the planning team further analyzed and compared the survey results and surmised that the mixed results

may have been the result of many factors, potentially including the following: the series length, the fact that the series was conducted full on Zoom, and mixed expectations from participants about the goals and deliverables of dialogue. Participants in the post survey ranked a more favorable response to attributes suggesting a better understanding of the feelings and beliefs of participants whose opinions and backgrounds differ from their own, specifically “....*feel understood by community members whose opinions and backgrounds differ from mine*” and, “...*better understand the feelings and beliefs of community members whose opinions and backgrounds differ from mine*.”

Education Dialogue (June 2022)

One session - June 15, 2022 - in person, Wellesley Free Library

- 15 participants (2 groups)
- 4 facilitators

Funding: No additional funding required.

Dialogue Description: Following Spring 2022 Annual Town Meeting, the planning team conducted interviews of various members of the community on both sides of the discussion around [Article 44](#). The team determined that the community might benefit from a dialogue to discuss different perspectives on education. The purpose of the dialogue was to provide an opportunity for parents to deepen their understanding of differing points of view on education that surfaced in the discussions of Article 44. We invited community members with diverse perspectives who are parents or guardians of children in grades K-12. School officials were not present.

The dialogue questions were created by the planning team and explored the following:

- Personal experiences with education and how it shaped participants’ views and values of education
- Hopes and fears about participants’ children’s education
- The meaning of “academic excellence” in the context of participants’ children’s education
- What role schools play in teaching about social and emotional issues (examples: race, sexuality, stress management).

Feedback and Take-Aways:

Twelve participants provided generally positive feedback in response to a post-dialogue questionnaire:

- Almost all respondents expressed interest in participating in a future dialogue; one said “maybe.”
- Eight expressed interest in a dialogue with school officials or wanted comments from the dialogue to be relayed to school officials. *[Note: Relaying comments was not part of the intent of the dialogue so we shared only very general feedback regarding the desire for more direct engagement with school officials.]*
- Five expressed explicit interest in having more opportunities for respectful dialogue in town, especially regarding education. One participant suggested a future dialogue to explore “different understanding and perspectives around the meaning and role of public education and different views on the role(s) that parents can/should play in that process.”
- Some noted that there was more common ground among the participants than they anticipated. One commented: “even where we disagreed, there was enough common ground that we could have reached a policy decision that all of us would have found acceptable about even the most controversial issues.”

Facilitators observations:

- This dialogue produced very meaty discussions and the in-person format (vs. remote) made it easier for people to establish connections.
- Most participants were experiencing dialogue for the first time and needed clarification about the purpose.
- There was some tension between the desire for a specific outcome and the goal of this dialogue to build understanding among participants.
- Participants want to be involved, they want to be heard, the system for communicating with school officials is not satisfying to some, and they want more direct dialogue and communication with school officials.
- Mapping conversations with the community (directing invitations to participants to the broadest group of residents potentially interested in the topic) were crucial to the success of the dialogue and helped ensure that different perspectives were represented.
- Facilitators can do more to promote curiosity among participants, to help participants go deeper in trying to understand each others’ perspectives, and to encourage people to share diverging views.

Race Dialogue (May/June 2023)

Three separate sessions were held, with different attendees participating in the same dialogue. Two sessions were in person and one was remote.

- May 9, 2023 - in person, Tolles-Parsons Center
 - 23 participants (4 groups)

- 7 facilitators
- May 12, 2023 - via Zoom
 - 20 participants (3 groups)
 - 6 facilitators
- June 1, 2023 - in person, Wellesley Free Library
 - 23 participants (4 groups)
 - 6 facilitators

Funding: No additional funding required.

Dialogue Description: Since the beginning of our initiative in 2020, many members of the community have expressed interest in a dialogue on race in Wellesley. We conducted an informal survey in January 2023 which went to more than 200 previous dialogue participants and/or people who had expressed interest in participating. The survey also went to all Town Meeting Members, chairs of 25 Town boards and committees (with a request to circulate to their members), the DEI Task Force, the Wellesley Freedom Team, and the board and subcommittees of World of Wellesley. We found there was significant interest in a dialogue on the subject of race in Wellesley among the 82 people who responded to the survey.

The dialogue questions were developed by the planning team, using [“Race in America: A Dialogue Guide from Essential Partners”](#) as a reference. Dialogue questions explored the following:

- Participants’ first experiences of their racial self-identity
- Participants’ direct or indirect experiences of racist incidents in Wellesley
- How participants’ experiences of racist incidents affected their feelings about themselves, others, particular groups, and the community.

Feedback and Take-Aways:

Facilitators and participants appreciated the opportunity to dialogue about a “hot topic” and to discuss the impact race has had in shaping participants’ experiences in Wellesley. Participant feedback from this dialogue was overwhelmingly positive with 73% of the survey respondents indicating the dialogue exceeded their expectations.

- Both facilitators and participants noted that both the dialogue format and the skill (experience) of the facilitators provided an opportunity for brave listening.
- In response to past feedback from other dialogues, we specifically asked participants what should be the next step. In response, this question provided the planning team with opportunities to forward their suggestions e.g., offering a human library, proposing this dialogue to PTA communities and providing bystander training.

The overwhelming success and engagement of the community in this dialogue further reinforced the need to select “hot topics” and enthusiasm for offering additional dialogues. The planning team is looking forward to training additional facilitators so more people can participate in the dialogue process.

Facilitator Training (November 2023)

A two-part, in-person facilitator training was held to add 20 additional facilitators to our team with a variety of backgrounds, life experiences, and viewpoints.

- **Part One - November 15, 2023, Introduction to Dialogue Facilitation** - 37 participants, two-hour, in-person session, held at the Wellesley Free Library
 - Topics included:
 - What dialogue is and how it differs from daily conversation
 - A brief background on the Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative
 - What role volunteer facilitators play in our dialogues
 - Participants were assigned to breakout groups for a “Thanksgiving” dialogue
 - At the end of the evening, all 37 participants expressed interest in participating in Part Two of the training (although some had scheduling conflicts).
- **Part Two on November 30, 2023, Facilitator Training.** Following the Part One intro, 20 people (12 community members and 8 Town staff) attended a full-day, in-person facilitator training led by our consultants at [Essential Partners](#), at the Department of Public Works Training Room.

Funding: Granted from the R.W. Babson Fund by the Wellesley Select Board.

Town Government Dialogue (February 2024)

“Town Talk: A Facilitated Dialogue Among Board and Committee Volunteers”

One session - February 29, 2024 - in person, Wellesley Middle School

- 42 participants (8 groups)
- 17 facilitators

Funding: No additional funding required.

Impetus for the dialogue: We were inspired to organize this dialogue after informal conversations with Town government volunteers. The planning team conducted interviews with 16 board/committee chairs to get their feedback on the concept and to gauge interest. Interest was extremely high, with the following themes emerging in the interviews:

- Relationships are important to getting things done in town government and it can be hard to develop those relationships, especially with remote meetings.
- There has been a decline in civility in town government meetings, which may affect volunteers' willingness to serve.
- Volunteers are interested in hearing about the work of other boards and committees, and in sharing experiences with handling challenges.

Primary goals of the dialogue:

- To provide an opportunity for Town board and committee members to build **connections**
- To share **positive experiences and challenges** in serving in Town government
- To encourage a **sense of common purpose** among board and committee members

Secondary goal of the dialogue: For board and committee members to experience this form of dialogue and the communications tools that it offers.

Members of 18 town boards and committees participated:

Audit (1)	Permanent Building Committee (1)
Community Preservation Committee (3)	Planning Board (1)
Council on Aging Board (3)	Recreation (1)
Design Review Board (4)	Retirement Board (1)
Historical Commission (5)	School Committee (4)
Housing Authority (3)	Select Board (5)
Human Resources Board (1)	Trails Committee (1)
Library Board (3)	Youth Commission (1)
Natural Resources Commission (3)	Zoning Board of Appeals (1)

Feedback and Take-Aways:

All participants were asked to complete an informal feedback form at the end of the dialogue. Everyone filled out the form but not everyone answered every question. The responses are summarized below.

Was the dialogue successful?

- 32 of 39 who answered indicated the dialogue **met/exceeded expectations**, 2 were neutral, 2 indicated “somewhat,” 1 “not at all” (didn’t know what to expect)
- 38 of 42 indicated they would be **likely/very likely to participate again**, 4 were neutral

Did we achieve the primary goals?

- **Clearer understanding of others’ concerns and challenges:** 33 agree/strongly agree, 7 neutral, 1 disagree
- **Facilitated dialogue conducive to open & respectful communication:** 39 agree/strongly agree, 2 neutral
- **Format of facilitated dialogue can help boards/committees build common purpose:** 34 agree/strongly agree; 5 neutral; 2 disagree
- **I feel more connected with other board/committee members as a result of this dialogue:** 40 agree/strongly agree; 2 neutral

Secondary goal: Familiarizing board/committee members with the tools of dialogue - How likely would participants be to use the tools in board/committee work?

- **Communications agreements:** 24 likely/very likely; 13 neutral; 5 somewhat/very unlikely
- **Timed go-arounds:** 30 likely/very likely; 7 neutral; 5 somewhat/very unlikely
- **Facilitation:** 30 likely/very likely; 9 neutral; 3 somewhat/very unlikely

Some suggestions from participants:

- Meet again
- Meet more frequently and mix up the groups
- More time for open conversation
- Choose a controversial subject to discuss
- Discuss handling difficult public situations

Housing Dialogue (tentatively November 2024)

The planning team is currently exploring a dialogue on housing to provide community feedback for the development of the Town’s [strategic housing plan](#) by the Barrett Planning Group.